



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

June 25, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

On behalf of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, I write to you regarding our ongoing need to safeguard the health of employees, volunteers, and clients at emergency food distribution sites as we continue to try to stem the spread of COVID-19. We are incredibly appreciative of you and the staff of the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) for working with our Bureau of Food Assistance to approve and extend our implementation of The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) Disaster Household Distribution (DHD) program. Since the end of March, this program has allowed us to efficiently and effectively provide USDA Foods to more than 800,000 Pennsylvanians in need of emergency food assistance each month while also enabling our charitable food providers and clients to maintain critical social distancing. With the DHD program coming to an end in Pennsylvania as of July 1, 2020, I respectfully request your assistance in ensuring that we can continue certain provisions of this program. Specifically, I ask that you use your authority as Secretary to continue to waive the need to collect client names and addresses and verify income eligibility for clients receiving USDA Foods through TEFAP through the end of the federal fiscal year on September 30, 2020.

As background, on Friday, March 6, 2020, Pennsylvania announced it had found its first two cases of COVID-19 and Governor Tom Wolf signed an emergency disaster declaration. Since that time, nearly 4 months ago, Pennsylvania has seen a marked increase in COVID-19 cases across all 67 counties. As of June 24, 2020, there have been 83,191 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Pennsylvania and a total of 6,518 deaths. This places Pennsylvania 8th among all states for confirmed cases of COVID-19. Moreover, as a result of the impact of the pandemic, between March 15 and June 23, 2,171,456 Pennsylvanians have filed for Unemployment Compensation. And, on June 19, 2020, it was announced that Pennsylvania's unemployment rate stood at 13.1 percent for the month of May 2020. While a reduction of 3 percentage points since the previous month, this is an increase of 8.9 percent above Pennsylvania's unemployment rate from May 2019.

As a direct result of COVID-19, Pennsylvania's charitable food system continues to be incredibly stressed as it serves an unprecedented demand. A survey of Feeding America member food banks in Pennsylvania reveals that they are seeing an average increase in demand of more than 50 percent since this pandemic began. In a state that normally serves approximately 2



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million people per year through our emergency food response in all 67 counties, data collected since the end of March shows that Pennsylvania's charitable food system has served more than 5.5 million people in just 3 months. Even with the DHD program operating during this time, allowing our partners to forgo data collection in exchange for providing USDA Foods, the unprecedented need coupled with the need to social distance has meant long lines and traffic bottlenecks at food distributions.

Compounding these challenges is the fact that Pennsylvania has one of the nation's largest populations of older adults. In fact, only 4 other states – California, Florida, New York, and Texas – have larger populations. According to 2018 population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, 18.2 percent of Pennsylvanians – or about 2.3 million people – are aged 65 or older. And, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Aging, an approximate 173,000 of these older adults in 2018 were living in poverty, making them more susceptible to food insecurity. Undoubtedly, this number has only increased as a result of the fallout from COVID-19.

While comprising less than one-fifth of the state population, older adults in Pennsylvania overwhelmingly comprise those who work in and/or volunteer with our state's more than 3,000 local food assistance agencies. These are the individuals who tend to be on the front lines, directly interacting with clients seeking food assistance. Knowing that older adults are at higher risk for developing more serious complications from COVID-19 illness, and with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reporting that 8 out of 10 COVID deaths reported in the U.S. have been in adults 65 years old and older, we have grave concerns about exposing these individuals to an even higher risk by requiring them to be in close contact with individuals in order to complete intake information. While Pennsylvania has taken advantage of the option to temporarily waive the signature requirement on the application form, the reality is that many of these intake workers/volunteers and clients will not be able to maintain a 6-foot distance while attempting to complete these forms.

A recent report published by Feeding America projects that the overall rate of food insecurity in Pennsylvania has jumped from 10.9 percent in 2018 to 15.9 percent in 2020. Moreover, for children, they project the rate in Pennsylvania has jumped from 15.1 percent in 2018 to 23.8 percent in 2020. While during this period of increased need for food, the Commonwealth has worked to take advantage of options and waivers available to feed children through federal child nutrition programs, has enrolled more eligible individuals on SNAP and WIC, and has implemented PEBT, the demand for emergency food assistance remains acute. As a result of this acute need, coupled with the dangers posed to Pennsylvanians who are both staffing and visiting emergency food assistance sites, I respectfully request that you use your authority as Secretary to continue to waive the need to collect client names and addresses and verify income eligibility for



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clients receiving USDA Foods through TEFAP through the end of the federal fiscal year on September 30, 2020.

Thank you for your prompt consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Russell C. Redding".

Russell C. Redding
Secretary